

“VIEW OF VIA DI RIPETTA IN ROME”

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CANALETTO'S NEPHEW, and pupil in Venice, Bellotto painted this *veduta* after a brief trip to Rome in 1742. The perfect perspective, the descriptive capacity and the poetics of place make this view proof of the precocious talent and vocation of the young painter in this type of composition — ingeniously prepared using the *camera obscura*, an indispensable accessory to the obsessive objectivity of Venetian *vedutisti* in the 18th century.

Bellotto painted more than 300 views, some fantastic (*capricci*), and devoted himself almost exclusively to this genre. His paintings depicting multiple sections of the cities of Dresden, Munich, Vienna or Warsaw are renowned. Having been absent from Italy since 1747, Rome was not the main motive for his painting. However, this *veduta* of the quay and the Via di Ripetta, next to the Tiber, converted into a placid public walkway in the setting sun, is an invaluable documentation of a place in Rome that has almost disappeared (especially due to urban changes occurred by the end of the 19th century and during Mussolini's time).

Via di Ripetta was one of the most important streets in the centre of Rome, integrating the so-called *Tridente* of urban roads leading from Piazza del Popolo. Following the left bank of the Tiber, the most striking and “picturesque” section of the street was the port of Ripetta, built between 1702 and 1704 as one of Alessandro Specchi's (1668-1729) projects in the context of urban reforms carried out during Clement XI's papacy. Radically

Bernardo Bellotto
(Venice, 1721 - Warsaw, 1780)
***View of Via di Ripetta
in Rome***

1742-1744

Oil on canvas

87.5 × 149 cm

Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf

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transforming the existing rustic dock, Specchi's project was of exceptional design, incorporating a convex central square, above the river, situated between two concave access staircases leading from the quay (fig. 1). It was built using stone materials taken from the Coliseum including a fountain (the *Fontana dei Navigatori*) and the customs building, with a balcony and two main floors on the northern side of the square, from which the arrival of goods coming from the upstream regions from Umbria to Tuscany were controlled. In the 18th century, the movement of barges loaded with oil, wine, grains and other commodities was profuse, as evoked in one of Piranesi's engravings (fig. 2).

Interestingly, these new features of the place, marked by the audacity of Specchi's architecture and the hustle and bustle that the new port conveyed, appear almost minimised in Bellotto's representation. The central square, curved over the river, with two columns that served as a scale for the highest of the Tiber's floods, seems to play a minor role overshadowed by that bestowed upon the customs building in frontal view that is unusual among the port of Ripetta's iconography. In truth, what is unusual is the point of view chosen by Bellotto. While conventional representations of Ripetta systematically adopted a view from the river or the opposite bank, the Venetian painter portrays the street in a direction parallel to the Tiber and gives greater importance, including perspective, to the row of buildings that lead into Piazza del Popolo, identified by the Flaminio obelisk which artificially emerges in the line of sight between the two columns of the Ripetta pier. This innovative change in point of view and framing is made for the benefit of an intentional "interpretation" of the street and its existence, converting it, as noted by Delfín Rodríguez, Spanish art historian, into "a kind of civic and almost gallant walkway, oblivious to most prosaic and appropriate activities of the place"¹, integrating into this dimension of use the configuration of the square and the viewpoint over the river, which occupy the centre of the painting.

The sequence of the row of houses on the right is accurately represented but some facades are not without a certain rich *veduta*-style idealisation. The main buildings of the Via di Ripetta are perfectly recognisable, beginning with the entrance to Borghese Palace, one of the most imposing in Rome with a portal by Carlo Rainaldi (1671-1675). This is followed, further along, by the church of San Girolamo degli Schiavoni, as it appeared after its reconstruction by Martino Longhi il Vecchio in 1588, and the church of San Rocco, with its sober facade erected in 1499 (and since replaced with an ostentatious intervention by Giuseppe Valadier in the early 19th century). This sequence of architectural facades, beautifully cadenced in shades of brown that individualise each building, culminates in the aforementioned obelisk in Piazza del Popolo. Bellotto often came to adopt this type of observation point and "motive" framing in later cityscapes with major rivers.

Bellotto's creative processes do not differ essentially from those practiced either in the workshop of his master, Giovanni Antonio Canal (*Il Canaletto*), or by other Venetian "vedutista" painters. His brief stay in Rome at the age of 20, at the end of a few months-long tour that also included Florence and Lucca, allowed him to paint nearly two dozen canvases with urban aspects and Roman ruins as well as the artwork exhibited here. This cycle of paintings was not in any way carried out entirely *in situ*, that is, with the "motive" in sight.

Executed by 1744, these works are the result of a laborious amount of notes and sketches (made while still in Rome), graphic studies in which Bellotto turned to a range of engravings and, finally, careful pictorial construction in a workshop environ-



Fig. 1

Port of Ripetta, 18th century engraving



Fig. 2

Port of Ripetta, 18th century engraving by Piranesi

ment back in Venice. In the initial phase of this pragmatic method, he made use of the *camera obscura* (the Correr Museum in Venice houses one of these optical devices that is believed to have belonged to Canaletto) many times. While many different designs and sizes are possible, a *camera obscura* basically consists of a box with a lens or circular hole on one side, through which light enters, and an unpolished glass on the opposite side, onto which the inverted shape of the object in focus is projected, allowing the "natural vision" of that object to be faithfully and conveniently captured and sketched. In urban views, the image thus captured is then reworked according to the scale of its figurative elements (e.g. buildings and people), the perspective and the contraction or expansion of spaces, in accordance with the desired characteristics of the composition. As seen in the *View of Via di Ripetta in Rome*, it can be said that the seductive final result, with its appearance of realism and topographical accuracy, results from ingenious and skilled "manipulation".

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¹ *Arquiteturas Pintadas. Del Renacimiento al siglo XVIII*, exhibition catalogue, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, 2011, p. 289.

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